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THE BRITISH ACADEMY

THE ANNUAL SHAKESPEARE LECTURE
1917

The Character of Shakespeare

By

H. C. Beeching, D.D., D.Litt.

Dean of Norwich

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THE CHARACTER OF SHAKESPEARE

By H. C. BEECHING, D.D., D.Litt.

The question I am proposing to ask on this occasion is not, What, so far as we can judge from the evidence of Shakespeare's plays, were the special qualities of his character? but a preliminary question, What reasons are there for thinking that Shakespeare had any character at all? Such a question has become necessary because of the tendency shown by the most recent criticism to divide what we had taken to be the indivisible Shakespeare; to explain his new and fascinating world of men and women as the creation of dramatic sensibility alone, into which his own personality does not enter; and to speak of all but the poet in him with pity or contempt.

Emerson, it may be remembered, when he discussed Shakespeare among his *Representative Men*, closed a eulogy of his 'inconceivable' wisdom and power of expression with the remark that 'other admirable men have led lives in some sort of keeping with their thought, but this man in wide contrast'. It is this paradox which has lately been revived, but it is now stated with much more emphasis; and attempts have been made to find its psychological explanation. I need only mention two of the most recent and the most interesting. M. Jusserand in his *Literary History of the English People* made an almost clean cut between the man and the poet. Shakespeare the man was an impressionable person, who had two environments and responded to each; living in Stratford the respectable bourgeois life of Stratford people and aiming only at comfort and a competence; in London living the loose life of the artistic circle, free in his manners and his morals. As a poet he was endowed with two excellent gifts, the one a vitalizing faculty, so that no matter what plot he takes, the puppets come to life under his hand; the other a lyrical faculty so exquisite that the commonplaces upon life, which he borrows in every direction, come home to our hearts by virtue of the marvellous music to which he sets them, and the personal *timbre* of his voice. On this theory the Shakespearian drama is like a magnificent orchid, which has no organic connexion with that which carries

it. The other attempt I will refer to was the brilliant lecture given last year in this place on the occasion of the poet's tercentenary by my friend Dr. J. W. Mackail. Dr. Mackail made no such sharp division between the poet and the man; but traced the superb achievement of the one and the failure of the other to the same impressionable temperament, which in the conduct of life left him at the mercy of every suggestion from without, but in the sphere of art enabled him to reproduce with amazing fidelity every lineament of body and mind with which he came in contact, so that his scenes have all the life-likeness of a cinematograph show. But at the end of his lecture Dr. Mackail pointed out, quite justly, that the 'facts of life', which were impressed upon the poet's sensitive temperament and reproduced in his dramas, exhibit the idea 'that good is not only different from evil, but better than evil'; which requires us to admit a moral factor in the poet's sensibility, and so leaves the contrast between his life and thought unexplained. We are back again in the unresolved Emersonian paradox. The real solution may be that the paradox is altogether untrue.

The student who sets out to discover, if he can, whether Shakespeare was, or was not, a man of character, finds that the materials available for his investigation are threefold: first, the known facts, such as they are, of the poet's life; secondly, the descriptions written by the men who knew him; and thirdly, the reflection of his personality in his works; if there is reason to think any such reflection is to be found there. I hope to succeed in convincing you that there is no conflict between the various portions of this evidence; and that the character it reveals, however faintly sketched, is not one that need leave us either sorry or apologetic.

To begin with the biographical record. The most striking characteristic, in my judgement, of Shakespeare's outward life, from first to last, is not its susceptibility to outside influence, but, on the contrary, the independence it exhibits; the determination, everywhere shown, to take his own line and follow his own ideals. A good deal has been said about his instinctive and unworthy conformity to his two very different environments in London and Stratford. Let me remind you of a few facts. In London Shakespeare worked, early in his career as a dramatist, in collaboration with Marlowe; and that Marlowe attracted him may be inferred from his reference in *As You Like It* (III. v. 82) to the 'dead shepherd'; by which he broke his habit of silence in regard to his contemporaries—a habit, we may note, in which he did not follow, but refused to follow, the fashion. On the theory that Shakespeare was a conformist by in-

stinct, this collaboration with Marlowe ought to have led him into tavern dissipation and brawls, with the chance of an equally squalid death; but there is no tradition of the kind. On the contrary, there is a tradition that Shakespeare reacted strongly against such influences. We have it recorded on the authority of an old actor, whose father had been a fellow-actor with Shakespeare in the Lord Chamberlain's company, that 'he would not be debauched';[1] and the tradition is confirmed by the tone of disgust in which he lets Portia and Hamlet speak of drunkenness. The purchase of the largest house in his native town when he was only thirty-three years old proves that he had applied himself to his profession with energy and saved the profits it brought him; while the unsuccessful attempt to recover his mother's mortgaged estate, and the successful application for a grant of arms to his father, as having been bailiff of Stratford, show a not unworthy determination to retrieve the sunken fortunes of his family. The dramatist Webster speaks of his 'right happy and copious industry', and the quality is not to be denied to an author who had some thirty-seven plays to his account when he died at the age of fifty-three. Is industry, we may ask, a virtue which a man acquires by always taking the line of least resistance?

The proof offered of his characterless conformity to circumstances when he retired to Stratford is the toleration of his Puritan son-in-law and the Puritan preachers who were invited to New Place. One cannot always choose one's own son-in-law, much less regulate his choice of divines; but there is no tittle of evidence that Shakespeare's respectful treatment of Puritans was a conversion to Stratford ways of thinking, for the sake of a quiet life in his old age. So far as we know he had always been respectful to them. He lodged for ten years and perhaps longer in a Huguenot household in London, and French Huguenots were very like English Puritans in their way of life; and he stands alone among the comedians of his age in never making ribald attacks upon them. Indeed in *Twelfth Night* he takes occasion, in the person of Sir Andrew Aguecheek, to ridicule the contemptuous use of the word Puritan, which was common among the more thoughtless members of the upper classes.

Maria says of Malvolio: Marry, sir, sometimes he is a kind of Puritan.

Sir Andrew: O, if I thought that, I'd beat him like a dog.

Sir Toby: What, for being a Puritan! thy exquisite reason, dear knight?

Sir Andrew: I have no exquisite reason for it, but I have reason good enough.

[1] See p. 20.

The only incident in Shakespeare's career, so far as the records go, which might be interpreted as an unworthy swimming with the stream, was the choice of subject for his first poem, *Venus and Adonis*, which may have been determined by the dissolute character of the patron whose favour he hoped to win. It is true that in those days a classical subject, whether in poetry or painting, was held to excuse a treatment which would else have been reckoned indecorous, and Shakespeare might claim indulgence on that ground. The poem had an amazing popular success, and Shakespeare could have repeated it had he chosen. But he did not do so. He wrote a second poem, *The Rape of Lucrece*, upon a more moral theme; and old Gabriel Harvey, the friend of Sir Philip Sidney, noted the difference in tone with approval. We have no information that Lord Southampton had become a reformed character in the interval between the two poems. It seems clear that the writing of *Venus and Adonis* was a deliberate action, not to be attributed to any softness of disposition, and the refusal to follow it up with another poem in the same key must have been equally deliberate. The incidents of Shakespeare's life, therefore, so far as we know them, do not fit in to the theory that he was a mere 'reed shaken by the wind', 'clay to every potter', 'a pipe for fortune's finger to sound what stop she pleased'. Rather they show us a man making his own way from small beginnings; by genius, no doubt, but also by industry and self-control; until he reached the top of his profession both as dramatist and as actor—for the best tradition is that 'he acted exceedingly well'. Can we add anything to this picture from biographical sources, any traits of benevolence, or right feeling? for though industry and self-control are an excellent foundation for character, by themselves they may be hard and repellent. The biographies of Shakespeare used to make a point of his many suits for small debts; but such suits were a part of ordinary business methods in Stratford and reveal little as to character; though they do not suggest merely easy-going good temper. Again, it used to be said that Shakespeare abetted the Combes, those petty tyrants of the Stratford fields, in their attempt at an unpopular enclosure, but this also is a misapprehension. Shakespeare took the side of his fellow citizens;[1] but as the question was only one of sentiment, and the town would have suffered no material loss if the enclosure had gone forward, the matter is of no great consequence. More to the purpose is the fact that Stratford people were in the habit of applying to Shakespeare in London to help them with loans or with influence; and it is in keeping with

[1] See an examination of this question in *Shakespeare's Book of Homage*, pp. 121–5.

this that the few incidents in his life, which have been recovered in our own day, exhibit him in the very attractive character of a good friend and good neighbour. In one of these, preserved in a scribbled note in the diary of his cousin, the Town Clerk of Stratford, we find him interesting himself in the affairs of a Stratford family who had suffered from the persecution of the money-lending Combes;[1] the other, dug out of some ancient law-papers by Professor Wallace of Nebraska University, shows him acting the part of intermediary between a bashful apprentice and the daughter of his landlord the Huguenot wig-maker, at the request of her mother. Such mediation was a recognized custom of the day, but none the less it speaks for the poet's kindness of heart.[2] One other incident may be mentioned which throws a light upon character. In the opening years of the seventeenth century a furious battle broke out between the dramatists Jonson and Marston, in which other dramatists presently took sides. Plays were written by both parties in contempt of each other, and many efforts have been made to prove that Shakespeare also played a part in this wordy war, but without success. It is certain that he stood resolutely aloof. But that this was not due to mere indolence of disposition appears from the emphatic way in which he spoke out in *Hamlet* about one side issue of this poetomachia—the controversy that was stirred up between the professional actors and the choir-boys of the Royal Chapel, who acted Jonson's satirical comedies in which the 'common players', as they were called, came in for much abuse. 'Will these children', he asks, 'pursue the quality' [i.e. the actors' profession] 'no longer than they can sing? will they not say afterwards, if they should grow themselves to common players—as it is most like, if their means are no better—their writers do them wrong, to make them exclaim against their own succession?' (II. ii. 362). Here there can be no question that we have the authentic voice of Shakespeare the actor, speaking on his own professional affairs; and if the words are mild they are no less firm and wise. What he says about the controversy seems to us now the only thing to be said.

We pass to consider the impression Shakespeare made upon his contemporaries. Most of the panegyrics that have come down to us deal, as is natural, with his verse; happily we have also a few testimonies to his character, in two cases from persons whose own character we know and respect. The first of these comes from Edmund Spenser, who in his *Colin Clouts come Home Againe* (1595), written

[1] Stopes, *Shakespeare's Environment*, p. 87.
[2] *Harper's Magazine*, March, 1910.

after a visit to London, tells of the poets he had met at Cynthia's Court, and concludes the catalogue with this quatrain:

> And there, though last not least, is Aetion,
> A gentler shepheard may no where be found:
> Whose Muse, full of high thoughts invention,
> Doth like himselfe Heroically sound.

The reference is 'unquestionably',[1] though it has been questioned, to the heroical sound of Shakespeare's name. We have therefore to determine what Spenser meant by saying of him 'A *gentler* shepheard may no where be found'. He cannot have meant 'a more impressionable shepherd', for that interpretation would be incongruous with the poet's heroical name, on which Spenser lays stress, and the pastoral name he gave him of Aetion, which derives from ἀετός, an eagle. 'Gentle' is, of course, as regular an epithet of 'shepherd' in Spenser's pastoral poems as it is of 'knight' in the *Faerie Queene*, and it might therefore be argued that it means no more than it does in many complimentary addresses of the time; those, for example, of the King and Queen in *Hamlet*:

> Thanks, Rosencrantz and *gentle* Guildenstern.
> Thanks, Guildenstern and *gentle* Rosencrantz.

But the use of the epithet in the comparative degree forbids a merely complimentary sense. When a member of the House of Commons is referred to as the 'honourable gentleman', the epithet is understood to be conventional; but if it were said of him 'a more honourable gentleman could no where be found', we should give to the epithet its full meaning. Further, if the whole passage in *Colin Clout* is read, it will be seen how carefully Spenser chooses all his epithets. Abraham Fraunce is 'the hablest wit of most', Lodge is 'pleasing', Golding 'careful', Alabaster 'throughly taught', Daniel 'well-tuned', Raleigh 'sweetly tempered'. 'Gentle' is used only of Shakespeare; and we get light on its interpretation from its similar use in *Astrophel* of Sir Philip Sidney and his sister. Sidney is said to be 'of *gentlest* race which ever poet bore', and the Countess of Pembroke, the '*gentlest* shepherdess that lives this day', and the context shows that

[1] The word is Malone's (*Variorum Shak.*, ii. 273). Todd and others have suggested Drayton, who wrote his early eclogues under the name of Rowland. But, as Drayton employs it, the name Rowland is not heroical, but pastoral; and if Spenser had meant Drayton, he would most probably have been content with Rowland, which was as well recognized as his own Colin, instead of coining the new name Aetion. Moreover, Drayton's *Heroical Epistles* were not published until 1597, and there is good reason to believe they were not written much earlier.

what is meant is the possession of those qualities of mind and heart and demeanour which make the 'gentleman' and 'gentlewoman'. This was the usual significance of the word in Elizabethan English. It included, no doubt, gentleness in our modern sense, so far as this formed part of the ideal of gentility; but it included also other qualities of the ideal, such as honour, valour, generosity, and good manners. In Shakespeare's plays we sometimes have the epithet 'gentle' followed by the particular gentle quality that was to be emphasized, as when Ajax says to Hector, acknowledging his generosity: 'Thou art too gentle and too free a man.'

We find the same epithet applied to Shakespeare by Ben Jonson:

> The figure which thou here seest put,
> It was for *gentle* Shakespeare cut.

In the case of a poet less choice in his epithets than Jonson, we might well interpret the word here in the vaguely complimentary sense; but when Jonson put his friend's character into prose what he said was: 'He was indeed honest and of an open and free nature', which means 'he was honourable, candid, and generous'; so that we are justified in taking 'gentle Shakespeare' in the fuller sense of the word, of which 'noble' is perhaps the best modern equivalent.[1] I venture to urge that either of these testimonies, Spenser's or Jonson's, would be weighty; taken together they ought to leave us in no doubt as to Shakespeare's disposition, as it appeared to his friends. There are two other contemporary references, and though they come from much less distinguished people, they are worth quoting because from quite different points of view they give the same general judgement. The first is the apology of Henry Chettle, the publisher and playwright, for printing Robert Greene's attack on the young actor-dramatist. 'My selfe have seene his demeanor no less civill then he excellent in the qualitie he professes; besides divers of worship have reported his uprightness of dealing which argues his honesty'; i.e. proves his sense of honour, which Greene had impugned. The other testimony is from John Davies of Hereford, who wrote two epigrams about actors, in both of which he expressly distinguishes Shakespeare and

[1] Jonson also uses the word 'gentle' in speaking of Shakespeare's writings. 'He had an excellent phantasy, brave notions, and *gentle* expressions' (Timber, *De Shakespeare nostrati*), but here it is possibly to be interpreted of the easiness of his verse; for in the Preface to the First Folio, 'To the great Variety of readers,' which was perhaps written by Jonson, it must bear that sense: 'who as he was a happie imitator of Nature, was a most *gentle* expresser of it. His mind and hand went together: And what he thought, he uttered with that easinesse, that wee have scarse received from him a blot in his papers.'

Burbage from the common run of players, and says they were superior to their position :[1]

> Though the stage doth stain pure gentle blood,
> Yet *generous* ye are in mind and mood,

where 'generous' means *generosi*, gentlemen. And to this word 'generous' Davies adds a marginal note: 'Roscius was said for his excellence in his quality to be only worthie to come on the stage, and for his honesty to be more worthy than to come thereon.' So that we get the same term honesty (i.e. honourableness) used of Shakespeare by Davies as by Jonson and Chettle, and the same general statement that he was a gentleman as was made by Jonson and Spenser. There is a particular interest about these epigrams of John Davies. He was not a poet by profession but a teacher of handwriting to the sons of the nobility and gentry, and so he looks at the stage through the eyes of his patrons. At the same time the society into which his occupation took him gave him a high standard of comparison, at any rate in the point of manners. I would suggest that Davies's epigrams deserve more attention, as evidence to the character of the two friends Shakespeare and Burbage, than the vulgar story, much more frequently quoted by biographers, from John Manningham's diary.[2]

We come now to the more hazardous portion of our problem, which is to find evidence of the dramatist's character in the plays we know. As a first step, we must criticize the assumption that the personality of a dramatist need not enter into his dramatic compositions, and that the humanity of the Shakespearian drama can be accounted for by its author's abnormal power of reproducing, by a purely intellectual process, the characteristics of the people among whom he was thrown. Because if this is a sufficient account of the matter, to search for indications of personal character in his works would be merely a waste of time. Let me suggest a parallel case. Suppose that Tolstoy had lived in the sixteenth century, and that we had even less knowledge of his disposition and interests than we have of Shakespeare's. Here too we should have much the same phenomenon :

[1] These passages will be found quoted in Ingleby's *Shakespeare's Centurie of Prayse*.

[2] Manningham gives the anecdote under the date March 13, 1601, as one told to him ; and it opens suggestively with the words 'upon a time'. It evidently belongs to the type of coarse and witty story always popular in England, of which every jest-book from the *Hundred Merry Tales* onward is full ; but which no one troubles to believe ; or indeed would be likely to believe, if he stopped to ask the question how the story came to be told.

a man capable of representing the whole pageant of life with admirable verisimilitude; beholding the evil and the good with steady eyes, and drawing them both with accuracy and understanding: and it might be argued with equal plausibility that he too was merely a reproducing medium of exceptional sensitiveness; with no interest except in the pageant, and with no object except to exhibit the infinite variety of human beings. We know how far from the truth such an estimate would be in the case of Tolstoy. I believe it to be equally far from the truth in the case of Shakespeare.

When we speak of Shakespeare or Tolstoy as 'holding the mirror up to nature', or 'reeling out a film-world of impressions' like a cinematograph, we are using metaphors to express the life-likeness of their men and women. But if we are inclined to press such mechanical metaphors into a theory that the author's whole heart and mind and soul and strength is not involved in his task, it is well to remind ourselves that by the 'life-likeness' of a dramatic character we do not mean that it is accurately copied from an original, but that it is constructed according to the laws of human nature. The dramatist does not as a rule copy his characters; he creates them in order to take their assigned part in a certain plot; most often, an imaginary one. And he has not only to sketch the character but to exhibit it in action and dialogue; which means that in every situation that arises he must himself be able to speak and act for his *dramatis personae*. On what then will the life-likeness of these dramatic persons depend? What is the 'vitalizing' power of which M. Jusserand speaks? It must come from insight into the working of men's minds; from comprehension of the motives which govern action in persons of various temperaments. And this comprehension comes from sympathy; that is to say, from the instinctive interpretation of what the dramatist sees in others from what he knows of himself. You may remember the story of a Mahatma who wished for a locomotive engine in an emergency, but found when he came to 'materialize' one, as he had only an external knowledge of its mechanism, that the machine he produced was defective in certain important respects. In the same way, a dramatist in 'materializing' a human being for his stage would be liable to the same accident, if his knowledge of the moral mechanism of the sort of person he required for his plot was similarly faulty; as it would necessarily be if he was simply absorbent of outward impressions, and did not interpret them by the experience of his own heart. Consequently, the limit to a dramatist's capacity for creating live characters is fixed by his capacity for intelligent sympathy; and this is fixed by the

depth and richness of his own nature: for we can only recognize such motives in another as we are capable of experiencing in ourselves.

How far then is a dramatist's own character a necessary element in his constructive imagination? We should all agree probably that a dramatist, like a clergyman, might have private vices of which his writings would give no hint. We should not guess from Robert Greene's plays that he was a drunkard and debauchee, though we should not credit him with any high moral principles. It would be perfectly possible for any competent playwright to draw persons acting courageously or beneficently though he himself were a coward or a pennyfather, because the general standard for these and other particular virtues would be familiar to him; but would it be possible for a dramatist to draw what we call a *noble* character, and to represent him, throughout a whole play, speaking and acting always from high motives, if he were himself vulgar-minded and mean-spirited? We should require a clear instance of such a phenomenon before we could believe it. From the element of nobility in most men they would be able, perhaps, to recognize a thing said or done as being finely said or done, but they could not, unless they were themselves noble, throw themselves into a state of mind so far above the ordinary level, and think and act in that character consistently. Now some of Shakespeare's most impressive characters are of this noble type. Othello, for example, is a great gentleman. We feel his magnanimity in every line he speaks. But this nobility is entirely the creation of Shakespeare: it forms no part of the character in the novel of Cinthio, upon which the play is based.

Again, on the hypothesis that Shakespeare was merely a sensitive medium, whose personality does not enter into his dramas, the question arises how we are to account for the change of tone between the plays of different periods. On this hypothesis, all that we could expect would be a greater accuracy in the delineation of manners, as his eye and hand grew in cunning. But the change we find is much more than this. There is a tone of sunny happiness about the Romantic Comedies of Shakespeare's prime which is very different from the serious benevolence of the later Romances; and at one point in the series of plays there comes a sharp division which, if Shakespeare's personality had to be excluded, would require us to postulate a sudden and widespread depravation in the actual world in which he moved. How are we to explain the change in tone between *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night* which closed the sixteenth century, and the long series of tragedies which filled the first years of the seventeenth? The mere change from Comedy to Tragedy may be

explained as a response to public demand, but that formal change does not give the measure of the difference in feeling between the two sets of plays, for Shakespeare had already written the tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet*, which belongs in spirit to the earlier period. The most striking difference between the two groups is to be found in the rôles generally assigned to the women. In the comedies, Beatrice, Rosalind, and Viola are the salt of their society; in many of the tragedies, the salt has lost its savour. Hamlet's mother, Goneril and Regan, Lady Macbeth, and Cleopatra are not the saviours of society but its corrupters and destroyers. The tragic catastrophe comes about through their means. Such a change of view requires explanation, and the only explanation forthcoming is that of a great, if only temporary, disturbance in Shakespeare's own view of women, of which we seem to find evidence in the bitter sonnets. This explanation is confirmed by the date of *Troilus and Cressida*, the love-scenes in which may be confidently assigned to the period of these sonnets, that is roughly to the turn of the century, while the scenes in the Greek camp are obviously later. It looks as if a Cressida episode in Shakespeare's own experience began that general discontent and disgust with life which we find expressed in the 66th sonnet ('Tired with all these, for restful death I cry'), and in the soliloquies of *Hamlet*, which lends itself better than any of the tragedies to such personal confessions. That Shakespeare was sound enough in spirit to react against such a mood of pessimism is shown by the character of Timon, which he treats as tragical; and we must also note that the period which produced the unhelpful Ophelia and the wanton Cressida gave us also Helen in *All's Well* and Isabella in *Measure for Measure*, characters of as sound moral sense and clear intelligence and firm affections as Portia or Rosalind, however much they lack charm; and at the last we come to Imogen and Perdita.

If then it be allowed that the personality of a dramatist must show itself in his works, and if there is evidence that it was so with Shakespeare, we may go on to inquire whether his dramas imply in their author any strong interest in a high standard of conduct. It may be convenient at this point to examine the case for the contrary view, which rests mainly upon two propositions. The first is that Shakespeare 'lets morality take care of itself', neither approving virtue nor condemning vice, or, as it is sometimes put, that he has as much 'sympathy' with his vicious as with his virtuous characters because they are equally 'parts of life'. That stern moralist Samuel Johnson brought the charge against Shakespeare that he 'is not always careful to show in the virtuous a disapprobation of the wicked', and that he

'leaves their examples to operate by chance'. Johnson does not hint that Shakespeare was himself indifferent to moral considerations; but he finds him 'more careful to please than to instruct'. If Dr. Johnson's view could be maintained, it would give an injurious interpretation to that large tolerance which every one recognizes as characteristic of the dramatist, and so lend colour to the dogma of more recent critics that his purpose is merely to represent human life, without any attempt at interpretation. But is it the case—to take Johnson's first point—that the virtuous characters of the plays do not show disapprobation of the wicked? If we take Richard III, Macbeth, Iago, Goneril and Regan and Edmund, and the Queen in *Cymbeline*, for examples of the 'wicked'—and it is not easy to find any other character whom even Johnson would call 'wicked' absolutely—the fact is that the virtuous characters in these plays express their disapprobation in the clearest terms. Can it be that Johnson has in mind the character of Falstaff, whose wit triumphs, notwithstanding his moral deficiencies? There is certainly no character introduced into the tavern at Eastcheap to say that wit is all very well, but that it is an insufficient equipment for the conduct of life. But on the occasions when Falstaff runs against the Chief Justice in the street, he hears some home truths; and the witty reprobate does not come off best in the dialogue. Then as to 'leaving their examples to operate by chance': this is necessarily so in English drama, which has no reflective chorus. We cannot wish that the dramatist should appear in person as epilogue, like Gower in *Pericles*, and explain why he approves or disapproves of this or that person in his drama. If the play itself does not make that clear, it has failed in its purpose; and the only test of whether it has done so is the judgement of the audience. Shakespeare writes for persons possessed of ordinary moral training and insight; and Dr. Johnson himself finds no difficulty in appraising the moral quality of all Shakespeare's characters. I would ask then whether it is not fair to conclude, in the case of so competent a playwright as Shakespeare undoubtedly was, that the impression which his characters make on us is the impression that the author intended?

An examination of Shakespeare's plays to discover what his alleged 'sympathy' with his vicious characters really consists in, shows us, first of all, that he draws them as men and women, not as monsters; that is to say, he exhibits them to us acting from intelligible human motives and swayed by recognizable human passions. Further, he does not, because they are deficient in one virtue, deny them all other good qualities. Nor does he in comedy refuse to make them amusing. But does it follow that he is indifferent to their vices, and that he

regards them with as much satisfaction as the good characters? Is it true, for instance, as has been said, that he has 'no attitude towards Shylock', but simply records his vices and his virtues side by side? If we look at the play in the light of its history we shall get no uncertain answer. In June 1594 the Queen's Jewish physician, Dr. Lopez, had been executed for supposed complicity in a Spanish plot to poison her. The theatres at once revived the anti-Jewish plays in their repertories, of which there seem to have been several, Marlowe's *Jew of Malta* being the most popular. A new one called *The Venesyan Comedy* was produced by the Lord Admiral's men at the Rose, and the Lord Chamberlain's men countered with *The Merchant of Venice*. Of these plays, Marlowe's and Shakespeare's alone survive. We can therefore compare Shakespeare's picture of a Jew only with Marlowe's Barabas, and with the original of Shylock in the Italian novel on which Shakespeare's play is based. The first comparison shows how thoroughly the stage Jew has been humanized by Shakespeare, through allowing him the qualities that the poet's insight suggested; such as the dignity which came from a sense of his ancient lineage, and the passionate sense of injustice which came from centuries of contempt and persecution. 'Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions?'

On the other hand, Shakespeare is not blind to the passionate vindictiveness which that contempt and persecution has also aroused, and which has rendered Shylock dangerous to the state: a wild beast that must be caged. Shakespeare goes beyond the old story (I owe the observation to Professor Herford) in the severity of the judgement he inflicts; he invents a Venetian statute which assigns the penalty of death to whoever seeks the life of a citizen, thus arraigning Shylock in his true character of murderer. So that when the question is asked whether Shakespeare has any attitude towards Shylock, the answer must be, 'Yes, certainly'; the trial and sentence show that his attitude was one of stern judgement. We shall conclude, then, that what is called the 'tolerance' of Shakespeare does not consist in any blurring of the boundary-line between good and evil, nor is it the 'index of an indulgent temper'; it arises from the power, which he possessed in exceptional measure, of analysing every action and passion into its motives; so that he can show us not only the thing said or done, good or bad, but also the thoughts and feelings which prompted it; especially all those unknown circumstances which tempt, and those secret aspirations and regrets which accompany transgression; so that we pity, even while we judge. It may be

true, as Dr. Johnson said, that Shakespeare's primary purpose was 'to please rather than instruct'; that is true, in a sense, of every artist; but so far as an artist of fine character puts himself into his work, it cannot fail to instruct as well as please; and particularly must this be true of serious drama, which is occupied more deeply and consistently than any other form of art with the ἤθη, πάθη, and πράξεις of human nature.

The second proposition urged in disproof of any ethical interest in Shakespeare is that 'in his plays he follows no other rule than to please the crowd'.

There is, of course, a modest element of truth behind the statement. As the playwright of his company, it would have been useless for Shakespeare to produce plays which the public did not care to see. But if we are asked to believe that in the choice and treatment of his subject he consulted only the tastes of his audience, we may well express satisfaction that their tastes were gratified by the plays we know. We can, however, correct such a judgement by considering one or two groups of facts. First, there were various types of play, exceedingly popular at the time, to which a dramatist who wished before all things to please his public might be expected to contribute. One was the dramatized murder, represented by *Arden of Faversham* and *The Yorkshire Tragedy*. Of this type of play Shakespeare wrote no example. Another popular type was the 'revenge' play represented by Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*. Shakespeare's example was *Hamlet*, in which the revenge motive is almost obliterated by the interest of character. In the second place, there were certain popular topics which Shakespeare altogether eschewed. The Puritans were a favourite subject of attack upon the contemporary stage, and with a certain reasonableness, as they were the avowed enemies of both dramatist and actor. Marston and Middleton are never tired of making them ridiculous. Ben Jonson devoted a play to them. Shakespeare has no Puritan among his characters: Malvolio is the only alleged instance; and, as I have already said, Shakespeare's reference to Puritans in *Twelfth Night* merely raises the question whether they are contemptible at all. Again, Shakespeare refused to please the groundlings by representing on his stage the vices of the young gallants of the time; or to please the young gallants by representing the vices of the citizens. By thus declining to copy contemporary fashions, he left his stage free for the exhibition of idealized manners, and characters generalized so as to present only the most human traits. Then, thirdly, we may point out that so far from always taking his tone from his audience, he occasionally does

violence to the sympathies of his audience in the interest of his own moral ideas. The dismissal of Falstaff is a striking instance. No Shakespearian character was or is so popular; even Dr. Johnson becomes lyrical about him: 'unimitated and inimitable Falstaff, how shall I describe thee?' From the days of Rowe critics have resented his harsh treatment by his old friend. Perhaps if he had been a character in pure comedy he might have been more tenderly dealt with, but as he plays his part in an English History play, and plays it very unpatriotically, choosing, as we may remember, only C3 men for his recruits, his maker has no pity; just as later in *Henry V* he has no pity on the poor satellites Nym and Bardolph, who are hanged for looting in France. A still more impressive example may be found in the changed *dénouement* of *King Lear*. In the old play, based upon the story in Holinshed, which had already been treated poetically in the *Faerie Queene* and other poems, so that it was perfectly familiar, the old king is restored to his throne by Cordelia. In converting the 'Chronicle History' into a tragedy, Shakespeare was compelled by the rules of that species of drama to bring the tragic hero to death; but the death of Cordelia has seemed to many spectators and readers of the play quite gratuitous, and even wanton. Dr. Johnson joined his opinion to the general suffrage by approving the version made by Nahum Tate, which allowed Cordelia to 'retire with victory and felicity'. Nothing is so popular on the stage as what goes by the name of 'poetical justice'; and it is an undeniable proof of Shakespeare's preference for his own moral ideas over those of his audience, that he should have permitted the innocent Cordelia to be murdered. The 'star-cross'd lovers' Romeo and Juliet had been sacrificed, not because they had themselves been guilty of any offence, but because, as the dramatist himself tells us, nothing but 'their children's end' could remove 'the continuance of their parents' rage'. Cordelia also perishes not for any fault of her own, but because the selfish rage of her father had brought her within the reach of those forces of anarchy which it had summoned into being. The deadly snake had indeed been wounded to death, but the most precious thing in Lear's life was snatched from him by its last vicious sting. May we take the alterations in the plot of *Measure for Measure* as a third instance? I think we may. Both in the original story and in George Whetstone's play based upon it, Isabella yields to Angelo's proposal for saving her brother's life. The pivot of Shakespeare's play is her refusal to do so. Such a change should point to something in the character of the dramatist who made it; must it not point to his view of what right action required

of a person faced by Isabella's dilemma? It will hardly be said that Shakespeare made this change to please the crowd.

I will take occasion here to say a word about the grossness of the dialogue in some comedies, because this has been represented as an unworthy concession of the poet to his audience. Tried indeed by the standard of contemporary comedy, we find that Shakespeare offends less than others; but we must note that social manners in Shakespeare's day admitted a style of coarse jesting which we find intolerable. The grave Lord Chancellor Bacon made and published a collection of apophthegms which contain jests very like those which distress us in Shakespeare. But Bacon would not have regarded these jests as a concession to his public: they were simply in the manner of the day. So it was with Shakespeare. It is a manner we dislike, but we must be cautious not to confuse manners with morals. In the eighteenth century a somewhat different type of coarseness was fashionable; and the letters even of that fastidious gentleman, the poet Gray, contain passages which few persons in this generation would care to read aloud in the family circle. Shakespeare's coarseness, like Gray's, was merely superficial; in neither case did it spring from defective moral perception.[1]

If we now turn to the plays themselves in search of indications that their writer was interested in 'good life', it is obviously insufficient for our purpose to quote moral sentiments from this or that character. A reader may be convinced that in certain speeches he hears the very tones of Shakespeare himself, but such personal conviction is of no use to convince the gainsayer. We must go about our task in some other way. Let us take for an experiment two comedies, the first and the last that he wrote, with plots, so far as we know, of his own invention—*Love's Labour's Lost* and *The Tempest*; and we shall find that in both of these the point of noble character is strongly emphasized. Berowne in *Love's Labour's Lost* is one of the characters in which readers have surmised that Shakespeare put a great deal of himself. He has wit in abundance, and also plenty of common sense. But through the lips of Rosaline he is told with much emphasis that to be a complete man he must learn

[1] It does not seem possible to say with the Poet Laureate, that in Hamlet's speech to the players, Shakespeare is 'putting his own criticism into Hamlet's mouth', and confessing that 'he had deliberately played false to his own artistic ideals for the sake of gratifying his audience'. ('On the Influence of the Audience' in the Shakespeare's Head edition.) Hamlet is speaking of tragedy, not of comedy; and in tragedy Shakespeare is careful that no clownage shall interfere with any 'necessary business of the play'.

earnestness through contact with sorrow.[1] *The Tempest* is a story of the exposure and forgiveness of a great act of treachery; and the careful way in which the dramatist distinguishes the degrees of guilt in the three treacherous characters, Alonso, Antonio, and Sebastian, points to a special interest and, it would seem, a special horror of this crime; while the praise of forgiveness shows the value that the dramatist attached to it as an element in character. In the case of *Love's Labour's Lost* we may smile perhaps at the youthful priggishness; in *The Tempest* we may concede that an old man, taking leave of the stage, has a right to emphasize his moral. In the interval Shakespeare neither preached as in the one nor left his moral so bare as in the other; but the two instances, coming at the beginning and end of his work for the stage, are a striking proof that he was not content merely to show the natural man his face in a glass, but was willing to admit a bias, and that 'on the side of the angels'.

But while Shakespeare's comedies supply incidental proof of his interest in conduct—and comedy, we may remember, was on one side a descendant of the old Morality play—it is in his tragedies that this becomes most conspicuous. Indeed, such a moral interest is proved by his very method in tragedy, which was peculiar to himself. Shakespeare took tragedy from the hands of Marlowe, and resigned it to Fletcher. Tragedy with Marlowe represents a nemesis falling on exorbitant desire. In *The Jew of Malta* the desire is for revenge; in *Doctor Faustus* for knowledge and the power that knowledge brings. In each case the hero of the tragedy is urged by the vehemence of his desire

> To pass beyond the goal of ordinance,
> Where all should pause,

if they are to remain human. Now Shakespeare's tragic heroes are not Titans, but men. They are not, of course, drawn from the rank and file of men, or they would not be interesting; but they are not so far beyond us that we cannot enter into their feelings. The temptations that beset them are such as are common to man. Sometimes it is one of the many forms of selfish desire, either pride, or ambition, or lust, which gains possession of the hero, and by its unimpeded growth reveals the treachery that always lies at its heart; sometimes it is one of those 'infirmities of noble mind' which do not make us love Brutus or Hamlet or Othello the less, because we recognize that the music of their life has been marred, not by blind fate, but by the pressure of circumstance on some 'little rift within the

[1] Act v, Scene ii, ll. 851-79.

lute'. After Shakespeare came Fletcher, whose tragedy has no heroes or heroines, only victims of tyranny. With him, therefore, tragedy has no necessary interest of character at all. Now it would be uncritical to attribute a change of method made by a consummate artist and consistently adhered to, either to accident or to the operation of some blind process of evolution. We must allow that Shakespeare's choice of his special type of tragic hero was deliberate; and the formula which best expresses this special type is, curiously enough, the Aristotelian formula that the hero must not be eminently good—like Massinger's Virgin Martyr—nor, on the other hand, an utter villain—like the heroes of Ben Jonson's *Catiline* and *Sejanus*—but a man of noble character, illustrious and happy, who falls into disaster through some error or weakness. Does not such a choice of tragic type tell us much about the character of the dramatist? On the one hand, it reveals his sympathy with all that is lofty in human nature; on the other, it marks his sense of human frailty and the disastrous consequences which that frailty would bring about, in circumstances which gave it a full development.

In conclusion, I will attempt to indicate, without going into detail, what can be gathered from the records as to Shakespeare's temperament, and from the plays as to the general nature of the social ideal which he advocated, and may therefore be presumed to have held. Fuller says of him in his *Worthies*: 'Though his genius generally was jocular and inclining him to festivity, yet he could when so disposed be solemn and serious'; and he goes on to give an imaginary picture of the 'wit-combats' between him and Ben Jonson. Fuller was nephew to John Davenant, Bishop of Salisbury, who was a near kinsman, probably uncle, of Sir William Davenant the playwright. Fuller's information, therefore, may be assumed to come from Davenant, who as a boy had known Shakespeare in his father's hostelry at Oxford, and could supplement his personal recollections by what he would learn in London when he went to Court in 1628. We have much the same tradition as to Shakespeare's conviviality and wit, with the same qualification as to a latent seriousness, through another channel. Aubrey, the gossiping antiquary, was in touch with an old actor William Beeston, whose father had been for a time in Shakespeare's own company. He records, on Beeston's authority, in one place that Shakespeare was 'a handsome, well-shapt man, very good company, and of a very ready and pleasant smooth wit'; and in another, apparently quoting Beeston,[1] that 'he was no company-keeper, would not be

[1] See Mr. Madan's note in *A Catalogue of the Shakespeare Exhibition held in the Bodleian Library*, p. 96.

debaucht, and when invited to, writ he was in pain'; excused himself, as we should say, on the plea of indisposition.

This two-sided temperament we could all no doubt parallel from men of artistic nature among our acquaintance. Some artists, like Wordsworth, are all of a piece; but there are others—Browning and Burne-Jones are two examples within recent memory—possessed of the double power of illuminating the surface of life by their wit, and at the same time of exploring its depths by their wisdom, who thus seem to lead a double life. Their interest in men and women takes them into society, where they are welcome, and there they enjoy themselves; though sometimes the excitement of company is followed by melancholy and a sense of time misspent. Shakespeare's sonnets afford evidence that he was liable to such a reaction:

> Alas, 'tis true. I have gone here and there,
> And made myself a motley to the view.

But this 'sportive blood' was the more superficial side of his temperament; we know it was combined in his case, as in other known instances, with intense devotion to his art, and also with shrewd common sense in the conduct of everyday affairs.

Of the opinions, which, from their frequency and the accent of conviction with which they are expressed, we may believe to be Shakespeare's own, the most striking and the least to be expected in the irresponsible, impressionable creature we are asked to believe that Shakespeare was, is the supreme value attributed to 'law and order' in the State. The great speech of Ulysses in *Troilus and Cressida* is the most elaborate exposition of the idea, but it is only one of many passages which lay stress on the sanctity of the ties which bind all degrees in the commonwealth, and all relations in the family, both to each other and to the 'heavenly powers'. We find a list of such binding elements in *Timon of Athens*:

> Piety, and fear,
> Religion to the gods, peace, justice, truth,
> Domestic awe, night-rest, and neighbourhood,
> Instruction, manners, mysteries and trades,
> Degrees, observances, customs, and laws.

In *Cymbeline* he speaks of 'Reverence, that angel of the world'.

Shakespeare seems, like Burke, to attach a sort of mystical value to long tradition and 'ancient and inbred integrity', sound government and security, and the mutual dependence and good understanding on which rest the pillars of the social fabric; and to have the same sort of imaginative jealousy about tampering with any single element in the precarious and intricate construction. So in the household, which

is one great factor in the State, he demands respect for the marriage-bond, and the mutual obligations of parent and child, master and servant. The strength with which this conviction is held will be appreciated when it is observed how frequently in the tragedies a disregard of these social ties is the cause of the catastrophe that ensues. Either the 'unity and married calm of states' is broken up, as in *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus*; or 'the brotherhood in cities', as in *Romeo and Juliet*; or the 'prerogative of age' is impugned, as in *King Lear*; or, as in *Macbeth*, 'strength' makes itself 'lord of imbecility'. And then the inevitable consequence follows: 'right and wrong' both 'lose their names':

> Then everything includes itself in power,
> Power into will, will into appetite;
> And appetite, an universal wolf,
> So doubly seconded with will and power,
> Must make perforce an universal prey.[1]

In the comedies we could not expect the lesson to be taught with the same emphasis, but every one will recall the passage in *The Tempest* where Shakespeare quizzes Montaigne's sketch of an ideal commonwealth, which should admit 'no name of magistrate':

> riches, poverty,
> And use of service, none; contract, succession,
> Bourn, bound of land, tilth, vineyard, none; . . .
> No sovereignty.[2]

And there is a curious scene in *As You Like It*, which so far as the plot is concerned is quite unmotived, where Jaques persuades Touchstone and Audrey to be married by a good priest, 'who can tell them what marriage is', and not be coupled under a hedge by Sir Oliver Martext. The admonition is not much in keeping with the satirical character of Jaques, but it sorts well with the insistence we find everywhere in the plays upon 'decency and order'.

Of Shakespeare's politics, in the narrower sense of the term, there should be little need to speak. All Englishmen under Elizabeth had much the same politics. But it has become the fashion lately to judge Shakespeare by our modern democratic and philanthropical ideas and to find him sadly wanting. We are asked, Is it not true that he despised the general mass of the people? Was he not specifically middle-class, with the characteristic reverence of that class for an aristocracy? Does he anywhere show interest in the poor, until indeed he came to write *King Lear*, when such interest had begun to be popular? Let me answer these questions as shortly as I can.

[1] *Troilus and Cressida*, I. iii. 85–123. [2] II. i. 147–57.

Creizenach points out that Shakespeare was the first dramatist to bring crowds on to the stage; and indubitably, when he does so, he shows them to be at the mercy of the demagogues who play upon their cupidity, as they always were, and still are. To Shakespeare, as to Chaucer, they are

> The stormy people, unsad and ever untrue,
> Ay indiscreet, and changing as a vane.

But he shows them to be as responsive to good influence as to bad, when they find a leader whom they respect and in whom they have confidence. There is a good instance in the insurrection scene in *Sir Thomas More*, which Sir E. Maunde Thompson's investigation of Shakespeare's handwriting permits us now to attribute decidedly to Shakespeare. Further, it must be observed that Shakespeare recognizes the shrewdness and common sense, and also the magnanimity, of individuals among them. In the scene where the Roman people, one by one, promise Coriolanus their votes for the consulship, the good feeling and also the good manners are on their side, not his. In regard to the second question, when it is implied that Shakespeare takes no interest in the simple lives and doings of honest, humble folk, does not this mean merely that honest humble folk are, as such, naturally wanting in dramatic interest? Moreover, on a stage like Shakespeare's, where it is character that is of moment, rather than manners, distinctions of class count for little, and in Illyria and the forest of Arden they become very shadowy. But when humility and poverty are of dramatic importance, as in the case of Helen in *All's Well that Ends Well*, we find that Shakespeare comes out as the champion of the humble and meek. It would hardly be possible to find a more emphatic repudiation of the aristocratic claim that noble blood is the sole title to social recognition than Shakespeare puts into the mouth of the Countess of Rousillon, the old lord Lafeu, and even the King of France himself:

> Strange is it that our bloods,
> Of colour, weight, and heat, pour'd all together,
> Would quite confound distinction, yet stand off
> In differences so mighty. . . .
> Honours thrive
> When rather from our acts we them derive
> Than our foregoers.[1]

As to Shakespeare's alleged indifference to the poor before the date of *King Lear* (1606), I can see no reason for thinking that the references to their hard condition in that play are other than dramatic.

[1] II. iii. 125-44.

They are perfectly natural, one might even say obvious, in the mouth of a king reduced to equality with a beggar. There is no evidence that they represent, as has been said, 'a swift response' on the dramatist's part to a new spirit of philanthropy in his patrons. Indeed, if it were so, Shakespeare's response was not only swift but short-lived, for we find no further references of the sort in later plays. No one can say that Shakespeare may not, while he was writing *King Lear*, have come across some hard case which specially appealed to him; but the problem of pauperism had been before people's minds all through Elizabeth's reign, and by her third Poor Law it was thought to be satisfactorily settled.

A second characteristic conception, allied to that which we have been considering, is the idea of man as a microcosm, in which a true balance of the elements under the sway of reason is required to produce a successful life, whereas the excess of any one element may bring chaos. Thus Mark Antony, speaking with the kindly exaggeration proper to funeral oratory over the dead body of his adversary Marcus Brutus, says of him, in lines that might well stand as Shakespeare's own epitaph:

> His life was gentle: and the elements
> So mixed in him that Nature might stand up
> And say to all the world, This was a man.

An equivalent image was that of a well-ordered State. The 'elements' of this microcosm, the estates of this little commonwealth, were in the psychology of the day identified with the four 'humours' or 'complexions' of the body, blood, choler, phlegm, and melancholy, and Hamlet speaks of

> The o'ergrowth of some complexion
> Oft breaking down the pales and forts of reason.

There is, of course, nothing in this that was not common property: what is peculiar to Shakespeare is that he finds in this balanced microcosm the ideal of manhood:

> Blest are those
> Whose blood and judgement are so well commingled,
> That they are not a pipe for fortune's finger
> To sound what stop she please. Give me that man
> That is not passion's slave, and I will wear him
> In my heart's core, yea in my heart of heart.[1]

And he gives us pictures of the havoc wrought by the overgrowth of some passion in such tragedies as *Coriolanus*, and *Timon of Athens*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*.

[1] *Hamlet*, III. ii. 73-8.

Of Shakespeare the incommensurable poet I have not tried to speak to-day, nor should I have dared to do so. I have nothing to draw with, and the well is deep. Indeed, when all is said that even other poets can say, we come back to the words in which Shakespeare praised his own friend:

> Who is it that says most? which can say more
> Than this rich praise that you alone are you?

But his genius is not in dispute. What is disputed is that behind the overwhelming artist whom we cannot but wonder at, there was a man whom we may judge by a human standard, and think of as both great and good. Against that prejudice I have pleaded the records of his life, which, though few, give a consistent picture; I have pleaded the affection and respect of his friends, among them that honest soul Ben Jonson; and I would plead also the uplifting tendency of his dramas, which are distinguished from those of other men, not more by their profound intuition into the springs of conduct than by the love they inspire in us for whatsoever things are true and honest and just and pure and lovely and gracious.

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